

Mike Flynn, Executive Director  
Boys & Girls Club of Ridgefield

H.B. No. 5044 AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES  
FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2017

Appropriations Committee  
February 16, 2016

Senator Bye, Representative Walker and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Boys & Girls Club of Ridgefield and to express the great need for the Neighborhood Youth Center Grant.

Eliminating this grant would drastically impact our Club. The funding we receive goes directly to serving young people who need us most and affords us the opportunity to serve our youth with quality programming and much needed support.

In Ridgefield we have 1525 members and serve more than 4,000 youth. This is more than two thirds of our communities youth population.

The Boys & Girls Club of Ridgefield provides:

- Award winning and nationally recognized programs to more than 1500 youth per year, more than 300 of those youth are high school students, who depend on the Club to shape them for the adult world.
- Annually, we provide more than \$120,000 in scholarship to those who cannot afford to pay our already low and affordable fees.
- Our Club was recognized as the Winner of Boys & Girls Clubs of America's National Honor Award for: 2015 Best Overall Program. We were selected for:

**Providing an Outcome-Driven Club Experience**

We were recognized for providing an Outcome-Driven Club Experience to our members in all five core areas: Sports, Fitness & Recreation; Character & Leadership Development; Health & Life Skills; Education & Career Development; and the Arts. The quality of the programming resulted in members achieving positive outcomes in Boys & Girls Clubs of America's three Priority Outcome Areas: Academic Success, Healthy Lifestyles, and Good Character & Citizenship.

**Implementing the Five Strategies for Youth Development**

We were selected for fully implementing the Five Strategies for Youth Development: a Safe, Positive Environment; Supportive Relationships; Opportunities and Expectations; Recognition; and Fun.

Our staff members take great pride in incorporating all five strategies into our daily programming, from welcoming all of our members by name, to recognizing our members for both small and large accomplishments through daily and monthly recognition ceremonies.

**Offering Programming Beyond the Walls of the Club**

We were chosen for our efforts to serve the community at-large by taking our programming Beyond the Walls of the Club. We did this by reaching out to a number of community partners to identify and engage youth who could positively benefit from our program. We also offer members opportunities to participate in several community-wide events such as the annual Memorial Day Parade and the Holiday Stroll, as well as volunteer for and participate in annual community events at the Club, such as Family Dinner Night and Breakfast with Santa.

## **Fostering Community Partnerships**

We were selected for fostering impactful Community Partnerships to enhance the program experience for youth. These partnerships include schools, social service agencies, local businesses and other service

and business organizations. From networking sessions with the Chamber of Commerce to healthy eating demonstrations by the Ridgefield Visiting Nurses Association, local partnerships allow the Club more resources to reach and inspire youth with unique and dynamic activities and has enabled our Club to maximize Boys & Girls Clubs of America's targeted programs.

The Neighborhood Youth Center Grant allows us to continue to reach our youth and inspire them to reach their full potential. I would like to leave you with a story from one of our 2016 Youth of the Year Candidates. I think this story articulates the type of need that our Club's meet across the state. This is one of thousands that you could hear from Club kids across Connecticut.

### **My Club Experience**

The Boys and Girls Club of Ridgefield has been a significant, and decisive part in my childhood, throughout my teenage years and leading up to my adulthood. Joining the Boys and Girls Club in 2007 changed my future since the moment I walked into the building. Having recently moved from El Salvador, knowing mostly no English, it was no more than two weeks after starting school up the road at Veterans Park that I was brought into the Yanity gym where the club was temporarily residing, oblivious of what was to come in the years ahead. Throughout my childhood the club has been a parent, a home and a family all together consisting of supportive staff, loving friendships and cheerful memories. The club gifted me a luminous future, saved my childhood and helped me develop from a learner to a leader, while providing me with a home, and a family that contribute endless support, love and determination to see me and my friends succeed.

Living in a home where only my mother was around, and my sister was busy making her own adaptations I was left vulnerable with nothing to do at home. Coming from El Salvador, Central American country with a high crime rate and nearly 50% of the children are being prosecuted for gun or gang related crimes. Originating from that environment, I carried a few bad habits along the way. Aside from these habits I had a difficult time controlling my emotions, which would lead to making bad decisions. As a troubled child, unable to express myself verbally I would have behavioral issues, and cause trouble in all sorts of way. At the Boys and Girls Club I would constantly be put on "the bench", for misbehaving or doing something I hadn't realized were considered wrong. Despite my constant behavioral issues throughout many years, the staff at the club would cope with me and understood my troubles, and tried help me understand why my actions were incorrect and how my actions always had consequences. I can credit the Boys and Girls Club for saving my life, because not only did it help me stay out of trouble in and outside of the Boys and Girls Club, but it served me as a parent that taught me values in life, disciplined me in the proper manner, gave me a place to go instead of getting in trouble and provided me with all the figures I could ever want or need in my life.

As a teen, coming back to the Boys and Girls Club the best decision in my life. Over the last couple of years I have learned many things, after settling back in I felt like I owed the club a lot, and I needed to give back in some type of way. I thought volunteering was a good way to do this, after all it would help me to eventually getting a job during the summer of 2015. However

in my attempts to give back I ended up gaining and learning even more from the club. I have learned the importance of being happy, and being in company of people. This inspired me to take action, and make significant changes in my life, I have always had the desire to help those in need, and when I see someone in a bad situation I want to help them; as I have been in tough situations myself, I know what it is like to be in need. With the leadership skills I have learned, I gained the confidence to step up and help those around me who could use a hand, and doing it with joy and knowing I was finally getting to do something I've been wanting to for awhile. The club has helped me come from a very immature child, to a young responsible adult, setting me up with many opportunities and programs such as Keystone that strictly focuses on helping teens develop into young adults. With some familiar faces and a few new ones, the staff has helped me improve as a person, gain experience by learning how to deal with real life situations, and dealing with unexpected issues. At the club I have learned many valuable lessons, however; helping me develop into a young adult, and saving my life are some of many things the club has done for me. As a child, my mother being the only income in the household, it was hard to do anything out of the usual. Luckily, the club also provided me with many privileges, exposing me to new places and doing things I would've never done if it weren't for the club. Simple things such as going to a Bluefish game were amazing for me as I had never gotten to experience anything like it, to allowing me to attend the 2015 National Keystone Conference in Florida. The club's help has allowed me to explore new things like going on an airplane for the first time; and now as a teen setting me up to be the first one to attend college. By participating in Keystone and Youth of the Year many doors have been opened for me, such as being the first one in my family to attend college! Attending college is a significant accomplishment that I want to do because it opens up an entire new world for me, it helps me brighten my future and most importantly it's something that would have never been possible without the help of the Boys and Girls Club and its staff, and it displays the hard work of an entire team, to help me shape up, learn, and be a first generation college student. Words can never completely describe what the club means to me. The club has been there for me since day one, it is the home of great futures and my story is proof of that. The club has been described as a home and family, but to me it's more than that. The club creates a family out of strangers, helps aid kids and families in crisis and saves lives. The club helped me shape up from a little immature child, and provided me with everything I needed along the way in building an independent young adult, setting me up for success and that is something I will never be able to thank enough for, and the reason why the Boys and Girls Club of Ridgefield is my home, family and savior.